

Exploring the Line of Descent in the
Intergenerational Transmission
of Domestic Property

Patrick Mullins

Urban Research Program
Working Paper No.55
September 1996



URBAN RESEARCH PROGRAM
RESEARCH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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SERIES EDITOR:
R.C. Coles

ISBN 0 7315 2512 4
ISSN 1035-3828

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Canberra, ACT 0200

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Australian National University 1996

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Mullins, Patrick, 1942
Exploring the line of descent in the intergenerational transmission of
domestic property.

Bibliography
ISBN 0 7315 2512 4.

1. Inheritance and succession - Queensland - Brisbane - Case studies. 2.
Home ownership - Queensland - Brisbane - Case studies. I. Australian
National University. Urban Research Program. II. Title. (Series :
Urban Research Program working paper; no. 55)

346.943052

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Series Editor:
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Abstract

While there has been growing interest in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property over recent years—and specifically housing inheritance—the line of descent in this transmission has been ignored. We do not know whether domestic property goes disproportionately to the next generation(s) of men, or to the women, or equally to men and women as the Western bilateral system of descent would dictate. Using published empirical research and data from a sample of Brisbane households, this paper tests an argument proffered by two European sociologists, Delphy and Leonard. They maintain that domestic property goes disproportionately to the next generation(s) of men because of the power of patriarchy. However, the Brisbane data showed that domestic property went roughly equally to the next generations of men and women, suggesting the presence of a bilateral system of descent. Conceptual and theoretical implications arising from this finding, relative to Delphy and Leonard's claim, are examined in the last part of the paper.

Key Words: domestic property, intergenerational descent, men/women

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Introduction

The very rapid growth in home ownership in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s not only led to the bulk of British households becoming home owners, but considerable housing wealth was also accrued by these households over this period. The high inflation of the time brought sharp rises in house prices and as housing values outstripped mortgages and increasing numbers of households paid off their loans, more and more wealth was accumulated. Housing has now become a major source and location of British household wealth. In 1968, 17 per cent of British net personal wealth was located in housing, but by 1988 this had increased to an extraordinary 52 per cent (Hamnett et al 1991: 5; Forrest & Murie 1995a: 67). Certainly there are marked variations in the amount of equity accrued, by class, by region, and according to when the dwelling was bought, but so striking is housing wealth today that it separates home owning households even further apart from renters.

With such a high rate of home ownership, and with so much wealth concentrated in housing, increasing attention is now being given to the ways British home owning households dispose of their equity. Three main options appear to be available to them: they can withdraw it and use it for their own purposes; they can extract it and dispense of it as gifts during their life time; or they can pass it on as inheritances after their death (Forrest & Murie 1995b; Forrest et al 1990; Hamnett et al 1991; Saunders 1990). It is the last two of these options which are of concern here, for the paper explores the intergenerational transmission of domestic property, whether as gifts or as inheritances, and it is the line of descent in this transmission which is of specific interest: whether domestic property goes mainly to men, or to women, or equally to men and women.

Domestic property is defined here as those goods considered necessary for day to day household life, with dwellings (particularly) and land for housing being the major components (Fletcher 1976). Of course, there are

other forms of domestic property as well, such as furniture, stoves, and refrigerators, and there are a number of additional goods which may not be regarded as necessities but which are important for the leisure and recreational opportunities they provide, for example, CD players. But it is the core components of domestic property — housing, and land for housing — which are of interest here. Within each family, are these components passed disproportionately to the men of the next generation(s), or do they go disproportionately to the women, or are they transmitted equally to both men and women as the Western bilateral system of descent would dictate?

This sociologically important question has, surprisingly, been ignored by that small band of British housing researchers who have furnished what information we have on housing inheritance (see especially Forrest et al 1990; Forrest & Murie 1995b; Hamnett et al 1991; Saunders 1990). Such disinterest is surprising both because an understanding of descent is critical to any comprehension of inheritance and because there is a very large general inheritance literature available covering descent which should have caught researchers' attention. Produced by anthropologists (for example Goody et al 1976; Longhofer 1993; Rogers & Salamon 1983) and by economic and social historians (for example Kennedy 1991) — with a little by sociologists, (for example *see* Kertzer 1991) — this general literature essentially focuses on the transmission of family farms. It shows how rural land passes overwhelmingly, and historically, to one son, and so consistent is this finding that it should have encouraged housing inheritance researchers to look at the descent question. The disinterest is, arguably, a consequence of an implicit belief in the Western bilateral system of descent forging an equality of transfer, with Forrest and Murie (1995a: 74), for example, maintaining that 'research shows that housing wealth is generally shared equally among beneficiary children'. Yet, there is no clear empirical evidence to substantiate this claim.

An understanding of inheritance in general is important because it provides a key to knowing how societies and social groups (notably families) are reproduced and thus the ways they persist over time (Goody et al 1976; McNamee & Miller 1989). Included is an appreciation of the social relations involved, with gender relations (notably in the form of patriarchy) clearly being integral to this process (Delphy & Leonard 1986, 1992). More particularly, with the ownership and control of property being central to the material well being of all peoples at all times, being cognisant of the

ways goods are passed on through generations is essential if we are to make sense of the persistence of material advantages and disadvantages over generations (Delphy & Leonard 1986, 1992; Goody et al 1976). Those who inherit are in a far better material position than either those who do not inherit or those who receive few resources.

With dwellings being the most valuable form of property held by the great bulk of households today (Saunders 1990), the receipt of a house in whole or in part as a gift or as an inheritance will be the largest single endowment the great majority of households will receive in their life time. Understanding the ways housing, and land for housing, are transmitted between generations, then, will be a key to comprehending the material advantages and disadvantages that successive generations of the same families experience over time, and therefore the processes by which the social reproduction of these families and other social groups occur.

In examining the line of descent, this paper is guided by an argument proffered by Delphy and Leonard (1986, 1992). Contrary to the belief held by the British housing inheritance researchers about an equality of transfer, Delphy and Leonard maintain that domestic property goes disproportionately to the men of the next generation(s) because of the power of patriarchy. Patriarchal relations, they say, not only lead men to own and control the material base of the family economy — specifically housing — but sons receive a far greater share of this property, either as gifts or as inheritances, than do daughters; a claim paralleling findings for farm inheritance.

The Delphy and Leonard argument is evaluated in empirical, conceptual, and theoretical terms. Empirically, it is scrutinised in two ways: first, from a scattering of published information on intergenerational transmissions of domestic property; and secondly, from a case study¹ which collected specifically data on the line of descent from households residing in the Australian city of Brisbane, the country's third largest metropolitan area, with a population of 1.4 million people. Australia provides a particularly useful test case for examining this question because of its historically high rates of home ownership. An estimated 50 per cent of its households were home owners in the 1890s (Butlin 1976), a rate achieved by Britain eighty years later, with the Australian rate increasing to 70 per cent by the early

¹ This study was undertaken in 1990 by the author and a colleague. See pp. 13-19 for a description of the data, methodology and results for this study.

1960s and remaining around that mark ever since (Troy 1991). The transmission of housing and land for housing from one generation to the next should therefore be historically far more widespread in Australia than in Britain. Moreover, because Brisbane has historically had higher rates of home ownership than other major Australian cities (Troy 1991; Frost & Dingle 1995) its households would have been in a better position to dispose of their dwellings, and the equity accrued therein, to the next generation(s), either as gifts during the owners' life time or as bequests after their death.

Considering how widespread the intergenerational transmission of domestic property is likely to have been in Australia, there is a surprising dearth of information on the process. Some interest has recently been shown in the rapid accrual of housing equity over the 1970s and 1980s particularly in relation to variations between social groups and between households residing in different parts of cities (Badcock 1994), but the passing on of housing, and land for housing, in the form of gifts or inheritances between generations has essentially been ignored.

While the major focus of this paper is empirical, the secondary aim is to extend what limited conceptualisation and theoretisation there is on the line of descent. This is done both to provide a framework to guide the empirical analysis given in this paper, but, more importantly, it should provide a basis for expanding this framework for purposes of further research. A detailed review is therefore first made of relevant conceptual, theoretical and empirical work and this is then melded with the findings from the Brisbane case study so as to broaden the conceptualisation and theorisation. The paper is, therefore, divided into three main parts: the first reviews relevant empirical, conceptual and theoretical work; the second presents the Brisbane case study; and the third briefly discusses conceptual and theoretical implications arising from the empirical findings, and this is done in conjunction with the review articulated in the first part of the paper.

Domestic Property and the Line of Descent

Before examining what has been written on descent and domestic property, a number of prefatory remarks need to be made about the sociology of inheritance generally. Sociologists have surprisingly neglected inheritance, despite its importance for understanding the ways societies and social groups are reproduced (McNamee & Miller 1989). Most of the

sociologically-relevant literature on this issue comes, as indicated above, from the work of anthropologists and social and economic historians, but this is generally limited to the ways family farms are transferred between generations. With farming families comprising an insignificant proportion of total households in the contemporary developed world, it means that information on farm inheritance is of little value for a more general understanding of intergenerational transfers. Farming households today are both producing (for the market economy) and consuming units, meaning that their social structures and systems of inheritance will differ from those of non-farm households, and specifically those residing in cities and towns.

Rather than studying inheritance, sociologists have been preoccupied with the way social and cultural advantages and disadvantages (knowledge, social skills, etc) are passed on from parents to children, and how these affect the quality of life for successive generations. Therefore, it is not the transmission of property (goods) — inheritance — which is of interest, but the transfer of critical components of culture; those affecting the next generation(s)' ability or lack of ability to acquire social privileges. This work comes in the form of social mobility research (for example see Erikson & Goldthorpe 1993) and has primarily focused on seeing whether sons remain in the same social class/occupational grouping/or other social position as their fathers, or whether they move into another class, occupational category, or social position.

This preference for social mobility, and indifference to inheritance, seems a consequence of a belief in social position being a better predictor over time of advantage and disadvantage, and thus of the ways capitalist societies and their social groups and institutions are reproduced. The rise of capitalism, and particularly the emergence of waged work, led to the bulk of households owning no property of substance, and so inheritance was unlikely to have any generational effect on well-being. Instead, it is the transmission of social and cultural advantages and disadvantages which are seen to have the greatest impact. Children whose parents hold significant amounts of social and cultural 'capital' are in a far better position to gain life-time benefits, than are those whose parents hold limited amounts of this 'capital'.

Greater sociological interest in inheritance is, however, likely in the future as more and more households in the developed world come to own the dwellings in which they live, and as increasing numbers of the next

generation(s) become beneficiaries in whole or in part of this domestic property. Moreover, with consumerism now dominating contemporary culture, invoking all peoples in all countries to consume as many goods and services as possible (Bocock 1993), the increased numbers of goods accumulated over a person's life time will eventually pass on to the next generation(s), thus also provoking an increased interest in inheritance.

Turning now to the intergenerational transmission of domestic property, what little data are available have largely been produced by the small band of British housing researchers mentioned above (Forrest et al 1990; Forrest & Murie 1995b; Hamnett 1991; Hamnett et al 1991; Harmer & Hamnett 1990; Munro 1988; Saunders 1990; Watt 1993). Though focusing on housing inheritance, they have shown no interest in descent, with their work emanating from a curiosity about the social consequences wrought to British society by rapid increases in home ownership over the 1970s and 1980s, and by the rise in housing wealth due to the high inflation of the time. There was an apprehension about the way home ownership and housing wealth was contributing to a new social inequality, one marked by an increasing social polarisation, and housing inheritance was thought to contribute to the perpetuation of this division over generations.

Observations made have been on the rate of inheritance, the characteristics of the people who inherit, the value of the inheritance, and what inheritors do with their windfall. Less than one per cent of the British population are found to inherit in any one year, although about nine per cent will inherit a dwelling sometime during their lifetime (Hamnett et al 1991). Beneficiaries are mainly middle aged home owners, although the age at inheritance is likely to increase as parents live longer and longer. Inheritors are also more likely to be members of either the middle classes or the dominant class, and they are over represented in particular regions (for example south east England). Dwellings are invariably sold, although sole beneficiaries are more likely to take up residence (Forrest & Murie 1995b; Hamnett et al 1991).

Only Delphy and Leonard (1986, 1992) have explicitly focused on the line of descent in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property, with their contribution coming as one part of a larger, sophisticated, and important work on the family, its economy, and patriarchy. In undertaking the wider analysis, they make a clear distinction between the family economy and the market economy. The former is defined (like the market

economy) by the goods and services produced, the goods and services consumed, and the (domestic) property required for this family production and consumption. The family, then, is an economic unit, one fashioned by social relations of production, and these are patriarchal in form. Men dominate, they say, because they own and control the domestic means of production — specifically the dwelling and its contents — while women, in lacking this ownership and control, are subordinate, and they provide an exploited labour.

With men disproportionately owning and controlling the domestic means of production, Delphy and Leonard (1986, 1992) argue that domestic property therefore passes disproportionately to the next generations of men. While this claim has a conceptual and theoretical logic (because of the pervasive power of patriarchy) Delphy and Leonard, paradoxically, fail to provide empirical support for it. They certainly maintain that they have marshalled evidence, but the inheritance data they use are not on *domestic* (i.e. family) property, but on *market* property: property of the formal (capitalist) economy and not property of the family (domestic) economy. They use the inheritance experiences of French farming families as evidence, with the property involved clearly being part of the formal economy, not the domestic economy. Certainly, there is a geographic congruence between the farm (the market property) and the farm house and yard (the domestic property), meaning that the latter is inevitably passed on in inheritance as part of the farm; as part of the market property. But if Delphy and Leonard are to argue a case for the way patriarchy leads men to be disproportionately favoured in the intergenerational transmission of domestic (i.e. *familial*) property, then clearly they need to focus on what happens to housing and other forms of domestic property, and not rely solely on data on the transmission of *market* property.

Gender inequality resulting from the inheritance of farms by sons, then, cannot be used as proof of a gender inequality in the *intergenerational transmission of domestic property*. It is not possible to generalise from what happens in the market economy to what happens in the family economy, even if the domestic property of farm households is integrally bound (but subordinated) to the farm. What Delphy and Leonard have implicitly done, then, is to generalise from what happens in one part of the market economy — the (French) farm sector — to the domestic (i.e. *familial*) economy. They seem to say that, since there is a gender inequality

in farm inheritance, and since patriarchy pervades all spheres of social life — thus giving power to men — and since the ownership of property equates with power, domestic property must logically also go to men. But, conceptually and empirically the claim is invalid.

In drawing attention to this fundamental error in Delphy and Leonard's work, it is important to realise that the claim they make for the intergenerational transmission of domestic property is given as a general statement about Western societies and it is not culturally-specific to France. They use data on French market (farm) property to illustrate their claim of male bias in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property in Western societies, in the same way that they use British data to illustrate their argument on men's and women's work in the domestic and market economies of the West.

Delphy and Leonard's failure to distinguish between the intergenerational transmission of domestic property, on the one hand, and of market property, on the other hand, is puzzling because one of the central tenets of their thesis is the clear conceptual distinction they make between the two forms of property; and the economies which go with each. To see whether gender inequality follows from the transmission of domestic property, it is obviously necessary to focus explicitly on this type of property. This would mean considering households whose ownership of property is restricted to the dwelling in which they live and/or to the contents of the dwelling, and these would be urban, and not farm, households.

While Delphy and Leonard failed to provide empirical confirmation for their argument, there is one empirical study which does furnish some support. As part of a larger study of households and their residential and employment locations in Worcester, Massachusetts (USA), Pratt and Hanson (1991: 70) found that 10 per cent of the households in their sample 'had inherited, purchased or been given their present house or land from an older relative'. Moreover, '(i)n some cases the intergenerational transfer of domestic property can be interpreted as an enactment of patriarchal relations: in 60 per cent of the cases, property has been transferred through the male line'. Though not clearly explaining their claim for patriarchy, it seems to rest on the way the majority of the dwellings went to men. Yet, they also point to a subtlety in the gender relations involved, since women living in inherited dwellings perceived an advantage to themselves in this

type of residence: the lower housing costs involved meant that they saw less need for themselves to be employed full time.

(T)he inheritance of domestic property can. . . (have). . . the effect of opening up a wider range of options, in so far as low housing costs reduce the amount of income that a household must produce to survive. . . (F)ive female respondents volunteered the point that inheriting a house had reduced the necessity for their full-time participation in the labour force. In fact, employed women in households living in housing obtained from a family member were significantly more likely to be working only part-time as opposed to full-time (Pratt & Hanson 1991: 71).

This conclusion, then, points to a far more complex link between patriarchy, domestic property, and the intergenerational transmission of this property, than suggested by Delphy and Leonard, and this will be more fully explored below.

The only other published piece on the line of descent in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property appears to be Mullins' (1976) Brisbane study. Contrary to the Delphy and Leonard argument and the Pratt and Hanson finding, Mullins (1976) found that women, not men, disproportionately inherited (or had received gifts of) domestic property. This finding had emerged from a larger study conducted in the early 1970s of households living in Brisbane's inner northern suburbs who were to be affected by the planned construction of a freeway. Data in that study were collected using two surveys, one of 155 households who were being forced to relocate because of the freeway, and the other of 367 households who represented a three per cent sample of the population living in the area but who were not being forced to relocate.

Inheritance data came from answers to a question seeking information about the way home owning households had achieved their housing (for example through a bank mortgage). A surprising finding was the way a third of these households in both samples had either inherited the house in which they lived or received it as a gift from a family member, or had inherited the land on which the house stood, or received the land as a gift from a family member. In most cases, the land inherited or gifted had been part of the parents' housing block and had been given to a son or daughter at marriage, with the married couple then building a house on the land. The benefactors of land and dwellings in all cases were the previous generation(s), and almost always parents, and all dwellings were detached

(i.e. single family housing) and the blocks of land were for detached housing.

In two thirds of these cases of inheritance/gift-giving, women were the beneficiaries. It is difficult to know whether this finding is an aberration, or whether it points to one among a number of variations in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property. It certainly cannot be said to indicate the absence of patriarchy, but it does raise questions about the way patriarchal relations influence the line of descent. Domestic property may pass disproportionately to men under certain circumstances (for example in particular types of cities or societies) and to women under other circumstances (for example in other types of cities or societies), and may result in a roughly equal distribution under still other conditions. It also raises doubts about the emphatic nature of Delphy and Leonard's claim. Only when a considerable number of detailed comparative case studies are available will it be possible to know the exact nature of the circumstances under which domestic property is transmitted.

There are two other Australian studies which also touch upon the line of descent. The first is Poiner's (1990) work on gender and other power relations in a rural area of New South Wales, where, among other things, she examined shire council records for the years 1917-1977 to trace the line of descent in the inheritance of farms and town land. She found farms passing overwhelmingly to men, but more of the town land going to women (50 per cent) than to men (36.4 per cent), with the rest (13.6 per cent) being shared. She restricts her discussion to farm inheritances and pays no attention to the town data because, she says, the numbers (22) involved were too small. Yet, her town findings parallel those of Mullins (1976) and they contrast with the pattern she found for farms. It is certainly difficult to make generalisations from her town data, not only because of the small numbers involved, but more importantly, because they do not allow commercial land to be distinguished from land for housing, and because we do not know whether the transfers were intragenerational (for example between husband and wife) or intergenerational. Yet, they still raise interesting questions about patriarchy and descent in domestic property.

A more relevant study for present purposes, but one also having limitations, is the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Australian family inquiry of 1992 (Castles 1993). Among other things it traced 'accommodation inheritances', these being gifts and inheritances passed

between family members, and taking the form of ‘a loan of money for a home, land, home deposit, mortgage, or large improvement; a gift of money for a home, land, home deposit, mortgage, or large home improvement; a gift of land, home, other residence, or large home improvement’ (Castles 1993: 42). A great range of goods were therefore covered, and they were well beyond the house, and land for housing, considered below.

The beneficiaries the ABS studied were those living in family households, these being ‘two or more people living in the same household who are related to each other by blood, marriage, fostering, or adoption’ (Castles 1993: vi). Family households comprise three quarters of all Australian households, meaning that a significant minority (a quarter) of households were not included in the study, all of which were non-family households, and most of whom were formed by people living by themselves.

The ABS study found similar percentages of men (2.9 per cent) and women (3.2 per cent) receiving ‘accommodation inheritances’, with the slightly larger female percentage primarily being a product of wives receiving inheritances from husbands. When all spousal inheritances (from husbands to wives, and from wives to husbands) are excluded, 2.8 per cent of men received accommodation inheritances, compared with 2.5 per cent of women. The difference between the two is small, suggesting that Australia’s bilateral system of descent brought a degree of equality in these transfers.

The ABS study has four major shortcomings which confuse the descent question, particularly for the analysis given below. First, there was no disaggregation of housing and land for housing from other gifts and inheritances, and so it is impossible to compare the findings from this study with those from the Brisbane case study given below. Second, in failing to cover non-family households, many inheritors were missed. With domestic property being inherited mainly in middle age, and since single people form the bulk of non-family households and most of these people are in middle or old age — many being women — it means that a substantial number of older Australians who inherited were not covered by the study. Third, the ABS study was restricted to inheritances/gifts received over the previous 10 years, meaning that total inheritances/gifts were not counted, an outcome particularly affecting older people (many of whom would be women); they are more likely to have been beneficiaries than younger people. Finally, for reasons just indicated, female beneficiaries were likely to have been under

represented because many of them would have been older women living by themselves.

In sum, the little data available on the intergenerational transmission of domestic property make it impossible to say anything categorical about the process, but what it does do is question the validity of the Delphy and Leonard claim. The link between patriarchy and the line of descent is not as clear cut as they imply.

There is one other body of work worth mentioning which should help clarify the nature of the line of descent, both generally and with respect to patriarchy. This is on the relationships which exist between beneficiaries and benefactors: whether inheritances/gifts are more likely to go to one type of person (for example all children equally; or daughters who assisted aged parents) than to another (for example grand-daughters). Finch's (1989) conceptual work on the complex ties which bind family members suggests one way of studying these links. By comprehending the obligations and expectations involved, in all their nuances and subtleties, it should be possible to make sense of why domestic property is passed on to the next generation(s) of men, or women, or both sexes equally. However, her approach does not trace, either in a conceptual or an empirical way, the precise nature of the relationships and how they are associated with the transfer of domestic property. Nevertheless, considerable sociological literature is available on family ties and intergenerational assistance, and this shows services dominating exchanges, and when goods are passed on they are largely financial in form (for example Cheal 1983; Hogan et al 1993). Thus, relative to all goods transferred, the transmission of housing, and land for housing, appears relatively uncommon.

All generations are found to assist one another in these exchanges, with most transfers being from parents to adult children and they largely involve money. Gale and Scholz (1994), for example, show how 20 per cent of United States personal wealth passes on to the next generation(s) during the benefactors' life time, and this primarily takes the form of cash. For Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Castles 1993) found that 9 per cent of adults living in family households had received some financial assistance from family members over the previous ten years, and most of this had come from parents.

Of the services provided by adult children to their ageing parents, women's labour is found to be far more important than men's (Kendig 1986). Concomitantly, those adult children who contribute the greatest assistance, particularly to parents in old age, may be more likely to receive inheritances (Kendig 1984). By implication, then, if adult women are the most important providers of assistance to aged parents, they are more likely to receive domestic property through inheritances or as gifts. However, there is no evidence confirming this process, although it does suggest the effect of patriarchy on these transfers, even if it did not lead men to be favoured.

Tracing the Line of Descent

Only Delphy and Leonard, then, provide any argumentation sophisticated and detailed enough to focus empirical research on the line of descent. While their case is flawed by a lack of evidence, a number of questions do emerge from their work which can be usefully applied to the Brisbane data. Most importantly, does domestic property go disproportionately to men of the next generation(s)? What proportion of inheritances or gifts take the form of dwellings and what proportion come in the form of land, and is there a difference between males and females in this regard? How much is solely inherited/gifted, and how much is shared, and is there a difference between men and women? How much is retained and used by the beneficiaries, and how much is sold, and again, is there a difference between men and women? Finally, and concomitant with Delphy and Leonard's claim about the way patriarchy leads men to control domestic property — because they own this property, and are thus in a position to pass it on to sons — is there any indication that men who live in owner occupied dwellings and are in conjugal relationships, are more likely than the women in these relationships, to be the sole owners of the dwellings?

Data

The data employed in the Brisbane case study were collected as part of the 1990 Brisbane Household and Residential Area Study (BHRAS). The goal of this survey-based study was to identify the structure of household and residential life and how it contributed to urban development (for example *see* Cohen & Fukui 1993). The research was formulated largely in response to a contemporary debate about the future of metropolitan Australia, this

being concerned with the rapid population decline of the ageing inner and middle suburbs, and the very rapid growth of the urban fringe — an area which is short of social services and which has a significant concentration of low income households (*see* Troy 1995). Of particular interest was whether variations existed in the household and residential organisation of different socio-spatial divisions within metropolitan Brisbane.

The BHRAS included four related questions on the intergenerational transmission of domestic property, these being tied to the domestic resources available to households. All four were a direct response to Mullins' (1976) findings, which in 1990 was the only published work available on the line of descent. Respondents were asked whether they and/or (if relevant) their spouse/partner had inherited a dwelling or land for a dwelling, or had received either of these, or both, as a gift. If they, or their spouse/partner, had, they were then asked from whom the property was received, whether they were the sole beneficiary, and what they did with the property.

Interviews were conducted in 372 households, all being selected by means of a stratified cluster sample. Census data had identified several major geographic concentrations of households within metropolitan Brisbane (the Brisbane Statistical Division): the inner, middle, and outer suburbs, as well as the bayside, and western suburbs. The inner and middle suburbs house a declining and ageing population, while the fringe houses a rapidly growing population of younger households. Bayside suburbs are similar to the inner and middle suburbs, but evolved from seaside towns, while the western suburbs developed from about 1960 and have the largest concentration of the city's middle classes. The stratified cluster sampling, then, was based upon these five geographic and social groupings.

Households were selected systematically from a random starting point, and an 80 per cent response rate was achieved, with data being collected by interviewers using an interview schedule. One main household member was interviewed in each sampled dwelling, and data were collected on the household, the respondent and, where there were conjugal households, the other main household member. A sampling procedure was adopted to ensure an equal representation of male and female respondents, and the 1991 census suggests that the data collected were representative of Brisbane households in the areas in question.

The line of descent

The BHRAS data showed domestic property being somewhat more likely to pass through the female line than the male line, although the difference is small. Of the 294 main male householders and the 336 main female householders who lived in the 372 households sampled, 22 of the males (7.5 per cent) and 37 of the females (11.0 per cent) received gifts or inheritances of domestic property. As Table 1 shows, these were both intergenerational and intragenerational, with 4 of the 37 women receiving an intragenerational inheritance, all being from now deceased husbands.

When intergenerational transfers are considered, slightly more women (9.8 per cent) than men (7.5 per cent) received gifts/inheritances, but this is not a statistically significant difference ($\text{Chi}^2 = 1.074$; $\text{df} = 1$; $p = < 0.10$). Age helps explain the variation, since slightly more of the women (35.4 per cent), than the men (32.7 per cent) were 50 years of age and older, and somewhat more women (16.3 per cent) than men (11.9 per cent) were 65 years of age and older. Women, then, were in a better position to have inherited. Nevertheless, the finding does suggest the impact of a bilateral system of descent: domestic property was transmitted roughly equally to men and women. Men certainly did not disproportionately inherit as the Delphy and Leonard thesis would suggest, and the pattern is different from that found by Mullins (1976) in the old, inner northern suburbs of Brisbane in the early 1970s. In the absence of comparable data this finding is significant, although far more detailed analyses are required to discern the significance of transfers to women, relative to men; men, relative to women; and an equality of transmission. In particular, data are needed on the nature of the relationship between beneficiaries and benefactors, the social situations leading up to transfers, and whether other potential beneficiaries were present.

A number of distinguishing features about the Brisbane case can be noted. First, the great bulk of the property came in the form of a dwelling, with very little land being transferred between the generations, and few differences existed between men and women in this regard (Table 1). Second, domestic property was almost wholly passed on as an inheritance, with gifts accounting for only a small percentage (12.7 per cent) of all intergenerational transfers (Table 1). In comparison with inheritances, more of the gifts were of land than of dwellings, although the numbers involved are very small, and gifts appeared to be received at younger ages.

Table 1
The Intergenerational and Intragenerational Transmission of Domestic
Property to Main Male and Main Female Householders
(Frequencies and Percentages)

	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Intergenerational Transfers						
<i>Inheritance of a dwelling</i>						
From parent(s) as sole inheritor	4	18.2	10	27.0	14	23.7
From parent(s) as a shared inheritance	7	31.8	12	32.4	19	32.2
From grandparent(s) as a shared inheritance	2	9.1	1	2.7	3	5.1
From aunt/uncle as sole inheritor			1	2.7	1	1.7
From aunt/uncle as a shared inheritance	2	9.1	2	5.5	4	6.8
Total	15	68.2	26	70.3	41	69.5
<i>Inheritance of land for building</i>						
From parent(s) as sole inheritor			1	2.7	1	1.7
From parent(s) as a shared inheritance	1	4.6			1	1.7
From grandparent(s) as sole inheritor	1	4.5			1	1.7
From aunt/uncle as a shared inheritance	1	4.5			1	1.7
Total	3	13.6	1	2.7	4	6.8
<i>Inheritance of a dwelling, and separate piece of land</i>						
From parent(s) as a shared inheritance	1	4.5			1	1.7
<i>A dwelling received as a gift</i>						
From parent(s) as sole beneficiary	1	4.6			1	1.7
From parent(s) as a shared gift			2	5.4	2	3.4
Total	1	4.6	2	5.4	3	5.1
<i>Land received as a gift</i>						
From parent(s) as a sole beneficiary	1	4.6	2	5.4	3	5.1
From grandparent(s) as sole beneficiary			1	2.7	1	1.7
Total	1	4.6	3	8.1	4	6.8
<i>Gift of a dwelling, and a separate piece of land</i>						
From parents as sole inheritor/beneficiary	1	4.5	1	2.7	2	3.4
Intragenerational Transfers						
<i>Inheritance of a dwelling</i>						
From spouse as sole inheritor			3	8.1	3	5.1
From spouse as a shared inheritance			1	2.7	1	1.7
Total			4	10.8	4	6.8
TOTAL	22	100.0	37	100.0	59	100.1

Source: Brisbane Household and Residential Area Study 1990

Third, parents were, by far, the principal benefactors (80 per cent), with grandparents accounting for about a fifth of the transfers, and the rest coming from parents' siblings (Table 1). Again, there was no real difference between men and women, although men received slightly more property from kin other than parents. Fourth, beneficiaries were somewhat more likely to have shared their inheritance/gift (56.4 per cent) than to have been the sole recipient (43.6 per cent), with somewhat more female (47.1 per cent) than male beneficiaries (36.3 per cent) being the only recipient (Table 1). Fifth, the majority of beneficiaries sold the property they received, and there was little difference between men and women in making this decision, although women were more likely to make practical use of the property, either by taking up residence or by renting (Table 2). This decision by women may reflect their weaker housing market position, with an inheritance/gift being of greater practical importance to them. Men and women who were sole beneficiaries of housing were also more likely than those who shared an inheritance/gift, to take up residence — about half, compared with about a quarter who shared. Finally, as the 'other' category in Table 2 suggests, men appeared to make a wider range of uses of the property received than women.

In sum, the transmission of domestic property between generations benefited men and women roughly equally, thus confirming the effects of the cultural demands of a bilateral system of descent. What was transferred was essentially a dwelling, and this was overwhelmingly passed on as an inheritance from parents to children.

Finally, since Delphy and Leonard (1986, 1992) partly base their argument on the power men hold over domestic property through ownership (i.e. ownership by men means inheritances/gifts go disproportionately to the next generation of men) it is worth seeing whether men did disproportionately own this property. To adequately test this claim for the Brisbane beneficiaries it would have been necessary to know who previously owned the house or land: whether a male relative, or a female relative, or whether it was jointly owned by a male and female together (for example by parents). Unfortunately, these data were not collected by the BHRAS, but it is possible to obtain some indication of the efficacy of the argument by examining ownership for the 213 conjugal households in the sample who were home owners. If Delphy and Leonard's argument is

correct, then disproportionately more of these dwellings would be owned solely by the main male householders.

Conjugal households are defined here as those containing married couples, or some other male/female partnership. The BHRAS showed that main male householders in these home owning households did not disproportionately own the domestic property. Almost three quarters (70.7 per cent) of the dwellings were owned jointly by the conjugal pair, with 12.5 per cent being owned solely by main male householders, and 16.8 per cent solely by main female householders. Although there was little difference between men and women as sole owners, it was surprising, considering Delphy and Leonard’s claim, to find slightly more women who lived in conjugal households being sole owners.

Table 2
The Disposal of Dwellings and Land Received as Gifts and Inheritances
(Intergenerational Only)

	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Dwellings Only						
Residence	4	25.0	12	42.9	16	36.4
Renting			2	7.1	2	4.5
Sold	9	56.3	14	50.0	23	52.3
Other	3	18.7			3	6.8
	16	100.0	28	100.0	44	100.0
Dwellings and Land						
Residence	4	18.2	12	36.4	16	29.1
Renting			2	6.1	2	3.6
Sold	11	50.0	18	54.5	29	52.7
Other	7	31.8	1	3.0	8	14.6
Total	22	100.0	33	100.0	55	100.0

Source: Brisbane Household and Residential Area Study, 1990

Certainly it can be argued that the ownership of domestic property may not necessarily be a good indicator of control over this property, since dwellings may be jointly owned but still controlled by men. Yet, it is important to reiterate Delphy and Leonard's claim. They say that it is because familial relations are patriarchal that men disproportionately own family property, and so men are in a better position to pass this property on to their sons. The fact that this ownership was not present with the Brisbane sample does not, of course, deny the power of patriarchy, but it does suggest patriarchy will not always, and maybe not even in the majority of cases, lead men to be more likely to be the sole owners of domestic property. Joint ownership may have more to do with preventing difficulties arising after the death of a spouse, specifically after the husband's death because men are far more likely to predecease their wives. If ownership were solely in the husband's name, the wife may experience difficulties in continuing residence if there were competing claims for the property from other kin, including children.

Of course, care needs to be taken with the Brisbane data, since detailed and very extensive comparative research is required before any significance can be demonstrated for these findings. The data are also limited because they were collected to merely draw the line of descent. Additional data are needed on structures and processes leading up to the transfer. In particular, data are required on the nature and significance of the relationship between beneficiaries and benefactors; on the relationship beneficiaries had with their siblings (if any) or other kin who could have received the domestic property; beneficiaries' housing tenure (for example if they were home owners) at the time the gift/inheritance was received; and beneficiaries' household type at receipt of the gift/inheritance.

Yet, the analysis given does point to the complexities involved in the line of descent, thus invoking caution in any claim that patriarchy in all societies, cities, or other spatially-based social structures will lead men to be disproportionately favoured. A one to one relationship between patriarchy and descent cannot, it seems, be directly drawn. Thus, a number of subtle influences are likely to be present, and so the last part of this paper explores these influences, and does this with particular reference to the Brisbane case.

Clarifying the Descent Question

It is very difficult to explain the Brisbane observations from current conceptualisation and theorisation about patriarchy. If patriarchy is at work here, its influences are not very obvious, and so the first step in elucidating the nature of the line of descent with particular reference to patriarchy, is to further clarify the concept itself. This is done with special reference to the household as the social structure within which the domestic economy is organised, the domestic property located, and domestic labour used. Logically, there should be a link between patriarchy, the household structure (including the way labour is organised by the household), and how domestic property is transmitted between generations.

For present purposes, the major shortcoming with patriarchy as a concept is the way it is operationalised as though it were a single, unchanging, and ubiquitous system. It is this which has made the Delphy and Leonard thesis so intractable for explaining the Brisbane case, despite them arguing a general case for the West. While there is universal agreement that patriarchy refers to the systematic exploitation of women by men, in practice it appears to come in a number of different forms and to vary over time and between different socio-spatial structures, such as cities and societies. It is these variations, it seems, which contribute to gender differences in inheritance/gifting, and it should be possible — at least partly — to explain the Brisbane data in this way. There are likely to be, historically, a number of different Australian forms of patriarchy, and possibly Brisbane variants of them, which parallel those of countries with similar histories (for example New Zealand), and these can be used, then, to explain the Brisbane case. However, the exact nature of this patriarchy is not known.

A number of leading writers have certainly implied the presence of varying forms of patriarchy, but detailed information on specific types has not been forthcoming. Walby (1986), for example, does stress the need to identify components of patriarchy and the way they change over time and differ across space, but she does not pinpoint distinctively different forms of patriarchy. Such knowledge is critical if we are to understand the links between patriarchy and any social outcome, such as political behaviour, or labour market participation, or, in the present case, the line of descent in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property.

For Australia, Kynaston (1996) has provided what appears to be the only detailed analysis seeking an explicit understanding of the distinctiveness of Australian patriarchy, and she does this comparatively with the British situation for the years 1850-1939. Clear differences are apparent between the two countries, and a couple of illustrations can be given. Women in Australia received the vote far earlier (1890s) than women in Britain (1920s), suggesting earlier political advantages for Australian women, although it is not clear whether these were ever fully realised. In contrast, British women were far more involved in the labour force. Over the first half of this century, married women in Britain were twice as likely to be employed as married Australian women (Kynaston 1996), and this implies a greater degree of economic independence for British women. While Kynaston focuses on an early period, it is this type of comparative analysis which is needed to pinpoint different forms of patriarchy and, in the present case, to help clarify the link between patriarchy and the way domestic property is transmitted between generations.

The second step in clarifying the descent question is understanding household organisation — the principal social and physical location in which patriarchal relations are played out — and it is here that an answer to the Brisbane case is more forthcoming. Households are income pooling and consuming units, and the organisations immediately responsible for people's day to day well-being (Smith & Wallerstein 1992). Activities include the organisation of labour for both domestic production and for employment in the market economy, and the accumulation (however limited) of domestic property to aid domestic production and consumption.

The income pooled by households comes primarily in the form of cash (mainly from employment) and in kind (through household labour) (Smith & Wallerstein 1992). The work undertaken within the household realises a range of services and goods, and these come mainly from women's work. A link, then, should be apparent between the way households organise labour for work outside and inside the household, and, in the case of the latter, between the type of domestic labour involved, the type of domestic property used, and the way this property is eventually transmitted between generations as gifts and inheritances.

The household's ability to generate a cash income is largely determined by the type of market economy in existence, although the state can also be influential, particularly with income transfers. The Australian market

economy has, historically, contained a number of unique features, and these have provided distinctive opportunities for households — outlined below — and, in turn, they have influenced the organisation of domestic labour, the amount and nature of domestic property, and, by implication, the way domestic property is transmitted across generations.

Along with New Zealand, by the beginning of the twentieth century Australia had become, per capita, one of the richest countries in the world and remained so through much of the current century, with the wealth produced (from the market economy) being more equally distributed than in many other societies (Snooks 1995; Thomas 1995). As a corollary, households had easy access to a relatively high cash income through well paid and secure jobs, and this was achieved under conditions of full employment and low taxes. These features, then, in combination with the availability of relatively cheap consumer goods, meant households were able to attain what was arguably the highest standard of living in the world.

Domestic property contributed significantly to this standard of living and came largely in the form of home ownership. Australia achieved a high rate of home ownership much earlier than in most other developed countries, and it was a high cash income and secure employment which ensured this outcome (Frost & Dingle 1995). Where 50 per cent of British households were home owners in the 1970s, this rate had been achieved by Australians eighty years earlier, and so, considerable domestic property was accumulated by Australian households relatively early.

These propitious conditions affected the way family households organised their labour, specifically who would be employed in the market economy to bring in a cash income, and who would be responsible for the labour required for the household economy. The relative ease by which family households could obtain a good, secure, cash income had a direct influence, resulting in one household member being responsible for securing this income: the man. Women's involvement in the market economy was limited (for example relative to British women) and it was the labour for the household economy which became their responsibility. In other words, with conjugal households being able to attain sufficient cash income solely from male employment, it meant Australian women were little involved in the market economy until conditions changed in the 1960s. This explanation parallels Pratt and Hanson's (1991) reasoning for Worcester women living in inherited housing; the reduction in housing costs brought about by

inheritance reduced their need to become involved in the market economy. Yet, it needs also to be noted that masculinist institutions, like trade unions, worked to keep Australian women out of employment.

The concentration of women's labour in the domestic sphere led to the growth of a very elaborate domestic economy which Mullins (1981) has called 'the urban peasantry'. This economy had been made possible not only by the widespread availability of women's labour, but also by the plentiful supply of domestic property in the form of owner occupied single family housing. A great range of goods and services were therefore produced, mainly for household consumption, and these added significantly to the quality of household life. So important has household production been to Australia that Snooks (1994) maintains that since the middle of the nineteenth century, the household, the private sector, and the public sector have contributed roughly equal proportions to the *total* Australian economy.

The 'urban peasantry', as an Australian form of urban household organisation, essentially disappeared by 1960 as more and more women entered the labour market, and as the commodification of increasing numbers of goods and services removed the need for households, through women's labour, to provide these products. Yet, an understanding of the urban peasantry is instructive in grappling with the descent question. In a reconsideration of his 1976 paper on housing inheritance, Mullins (1981) suggested that women disproportionately inherited domestic property, or received it as a gift, because of the central role they played in the urban peasantry. The house and yard was the capital, and women provided the bulk of the labour, and so, women, he argued, should disproportionately inherit this property because of their central role in this economy. This is in the same way that males disproportionately own and inherit family farms: they provide the bulk of the labour and run the business, and so they also inherit.

While Mullins' (1981) argument may have some merit for the pre-1950s period — although even here the effects on descent need to be questioned — it seems superfluous for today's world and, particularly, for explaining the 1990 observation. Contemporary households take different forms and, although women still perform the bulk of the domestic work, the number of goods and services produced has declined substantially over the last four decades. Still, an understanding of contemporary income pooling and consuming activities, and the gender differences in the labour involved,

appears necessary to help explain the line of descent in the contemporary period.

Domestic property today is far more important for the opportunities it provides for the consumption of a great range of goods and services. Quality of life is now even more defined by the consumption of goods produced in the market economy, and less and less by those produced within the household. Income pooling is now more closely tied to securing a cash income, not only to buy necessities, but to enable access to an increasingly wide range of goods and services consumed for pleasure; to satisfy wants/desires (Bocock 1993). It is the obsessive drive to satisfy the cultural goal of consumerism which appears to be shaping the contemporary household. Thus, in conjugal households, both the male and female are now more likely to be employed, and this is not only to enable the purchase of necessities, like housing, but to allow easier satisfaction of wants/desires. Here, the ownership of domestic property is critical, for it provides the social and spatial context for this obsessive consumption (*see* Savage et al 1992).

The intriguing question to ask now is whether the inheriting and gifting of domestic property is more closely tied to opportunities to consume, particularly those goods and services dispensing pleasure, rather than those which satisfy needs. If housing is increasingly important for satisfying wants and desires, then the passing on of domestic property as gifts or inheritances may increasingly be linked to this issue, rather than the satisfaction of needs. Indeed, housing inheritance appears to be more of a windfall, than an avenue for satisfying basic housing needs. By the time beneficiaries inherit they are in middle age and they are already home owners (Thorns 1995). Indeed, in the future they will inherit at older ages as parents live longer and, under these conditions, the inheritance of domestic property will make even less difference to beneficiaries' overall well-being; it will merely offer an additional opportunity to consume, or allow them to pass it on as a gift.

In contrast with inheritance, the receipt of domestic property as a gift is likely to have different implications, because gifts are invariably received at younger ages, often when people are in their twenties and at critical periods of time, such as marriage. Gifts, then, are likely to have a far greater impact upon the well-being of recipients than inherited domestic property and, under such circumstances, the line of descent in gift giving should be

instructive. Although the number receiving gifts in the Brisbane study was very small (9), more women (6) than men (3) were recipients (see Table 1). Therefore, if there is a pervasive role played by patriarchy in the transmission of domestic property between generations, it should be more likely to be played out with gift giving, although the Brisbane data do not suggest that patriarchy is at work here; at least in terms of favouring men.

Far more data are required to clarify the link between households, gender, and consumerism. In particular, we need to know whether women play a pivotal role in this process, although some indications are already available (for example Reekie 1993).

The discussion so far has focused on two general, though related, aspects of social structure: patriarchy as the wider context affecting descent, and households as the particular context. An understanding of these two will provide the broad parameters from which a comprehension can be achieved of the descent question. What they cannot do is provide knowledge about the specific contexts in which inheritance/gifting occurs. This can only come from an understanding of familial relations, including noting the 'gendered' nature of these relations, and this is the approach adopted by Finch and her colleagues (Finch 1989; Finch and Hayes 1994; Finch and Wallis 1993). Knowledge of the ties linking family members, particularly daughters and parents (including mothers and fathers separately) and sons and parents (including mothers and fathers separately) is critical because these represent the major lines along which gifts and inheritances flow. In particular, it is the nature of the ties leading up to the last parent's death which is important, for these may more clearly identify who becomes the beneficiary and who misses out. Unfortunately, these issues were not covered by the Brisbane study, but what is required is some form of intensive interviewing of the type adopted by Finch, rather than the survey research adopted here.

In sum, an understanding of the line of descent in the intergenerational transmission of domestic property is likely to be understood in three related ways. First, by comprehending the form of patriarchy present, for this provides the major backdrop against which descent operates. Second, by understanding the organisation of households, specifically the way labour is dispersed outside and within the household, and the domestic property accumulated by the household. Finally, by knowing the nature of the ties

existing between benefactors and beneficiaries, the paths taken in dispensing domestic property intergenerationally should become apparent.

That so little attention has been given to the line of descent is surprising since, as Delphy and Leonard acknowledge, it speaks loudly for gender relations. This paper has attempted to open out the debate by exploring the descent question conceptually, theoretically, and empirically. There is an urgent need now for widespread comparative research, for this will enable an improved conceptualisation and this, in turn, will provide the framework for further research. Resulting research findings will, in hand with the conceptualisation, then enable a more adequate foundation for understanding — for theorising — this process.

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